

A Philosophical Theologian's Review Essay of Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?*

Paul Tyson

Abstract: Judith Butler's work relates directly to science and religion concerns. Scientific questions regarding the nature of male and female sex, and the relation of biological sex to Butler's conception of gender are important concerns in her work. Butler also has an abiding disdain for traditional Christian anthropology with its binary heteronormative sexual ethics. Conservative Christian religion is thus seen by Butler as a moral and political enemy of progressive humanity and reason. For these two reasons, as well as the fact that Butler has had an enormous impact on contemporary culture and law through her gender studies work, it is important that Christians who are interested in science and in the cultural and political currents of our times, understand her work. People who do not usually read post-modern gender theory will find the terrain demanding. Indeed, Butler's writing is difficult even for professional philosophers to decipher. However, her 2024 book—*Who's Afraid of Gender*—is remarkably accessible. Considering the importance to science, religion, and contemporary culture that these matters are, and considering that this is an unusually accessible text by Butler, I here offer a philosophically engaged and theologically critical review essay of Butler's latest book.

Keywords: Christian heteronormativity; gender critical feminism; Judith Butler; queer theory; science and religion; sex and gender

Dr Paul Tyson is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow with the School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry at the University of Queensland. He works across philosophy, theology, and sociology. He has been working in the “science and religion” domain for the past decade, and recently coordinated the “After Science and Religion” project with such contributing luminaries as William Desmond, Peter Harrison, John Milbank, and Charles Taylor. His most recent book in this domain is *A Christian Theology of Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

Professor Judith Butler is arguably the most influential gender studies academic of the past four decades. Her work relates directly to science as Butler maintains that humans are not a definable male/female sex-binary species, but humans exemplify culturally, politically, and psychologically dynamic sex-spectral fluidity.¹ Her work also relates directly to the Christian faith as Butler argues that the sexual ethics of traditional Christianity is psychoanalytically “toxic,”² as it is definitionally phobic, morally and conceptually indefensible, and integral with fascism.³

Overview

Unlike her earlier texts, Butler's latest book—*Who's Afraid of Gender?*—is no technical work of theoretical arcana, but is a clearly written and broadly accessible text for a general readership. This makes for refreshingly easy reading, but difficulties discerning what Butler really means by the words “gender” and “sex” remain.⁴

Putting central definitional difficulties to one side for the moment, the core thrust of Butler's text is crystal clear. Indeed, her primary claim is arguably clearer than would be allowed by any reasonable analysis of the speculative complexities of psychosocial phenom-

1 Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (London: Allen Lane, 2024), 153–154, 190.

2 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 168, in agreement with a citation of Gail Lewis.

3 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 73–92.

4 Even among philosophically trained academic readers Butler has a reputation for convoluted terminological opacity. In the prime of her rise to prominence (1999), the scholarly journal *Philosophy and Literature* awarded Judith Butler the first prize for its International Bad Writing Contest, for this sentence: “The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.”—as cited in “The World's Worst Writing,” *The Guardian*, 25 December 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/dec/24/news>.

ena and the great range of political stances people can have. Centrally, Butler is claiming that people who are “afraid of gender”⁵ are—explicitly or implicitly—hate-motivated⁶ fascists.⁷ Persuading us that this is so, and proposing how to combat this moral pathology is what Butler is seeking to achieve in her book. This being the case, the genre of her latest book does not properly belong to academic theory, but—in technical terms (implying no value judgement)—it is at least akin to political propaganda. *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* is centrally concerned with how good progressive humanists of the Left can identify and resist the reactionary and destructive gender-fearful politics of the Right.

Using the psychosocial speculations of Jean Laplanche,⁸ Butler claims that gender has become a seething political black hole of fear, drawing in and transforming a large array of serious anxieties and insecurities endemic to our distressing times. Accordingly, Butler maintains that those who are afraid of gender now threaten to plunge all our political landscapes into a reactionary and fascist revolt against the important gains that gender theory has recently made. These gains are expressed in the recently acquired social, educational, and legal

5 Butler, *Who’s Afraid*, 3.

6 Butler claims that an aggressive and violent hatred is what characterises the largely religious promoters of anti-gender reactionism. “Hatred is stoked and rationalized by moral righteousness, and all those damaged and destroyed by hateful movements are cast as the truer agents of destruction. These projections and reversals structure the phantasmatic scene of ‘gender’” (Butler, *Who’s Afraid*, 11).

7 Appropriating Jean Laplanche’s enigmatic and speculative gender assignment psychosocial theories about collective phobias, Butler informs us that we can best “understand the anti-gender movement as part of fascism” (Butler, *Who’s Afraid*, 25). That is, Butler assumes that anyone who disagrees with queer gender identity theory does not disagree because the theory is inherently hard to believe and defies obvious scientific facts about the human sex binary, but because they are pathologically phobic and hateful. This is an emotive rhetorical method that has thus far proved very successful in closing down the question of whether normal factual biological realities have anything to do with the significant legal question of whether a transwoman should be treated as in all regards a *real* woman in relation to female-sex only spaces (such as change rooms, toilets, shelters, maternity wards, prisons) and arenas (such as sport).

8 Butler, *Who’s Afraid*, 10.

influence of the diversity, inclusion, and equality movement (hereafter referred to as the rainbow movement).

Practically, the rainbow movement claims to uphold the pride and non-discrimination rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual,⁹ queer, trans, and other non-heteronormative people. Theoretically the rainbow's contemporary gender theories justify the liberation of feminism—and the Australian Sex Discrimination Act,¹⁰ and all of us—from what Butler argues are indefensible second-wave-feminist sex-binary assumptions. Butler is determined that these practical and theoretical gains will not be undermined by the reactionary, antiscientific, and hateful politics of the fear of gender.

For all her nonpolarising fluidity, Butler presents us with a strictly binary political landscape where “the Left” (those who do not fear gender) is implacably, but futilely, opposed by “the Right”¹¹ (those

9 The LGB Alliance does not believe the rainbow movement represents same-sex attracted people. The LGB Alliance upholds the reality of the biological sex binary and opposes “affirmative” sex-presentation hormonal and surgical interventions for minors. See LGB Alliance UK, <https://lgballiance.org.uk/policies/>. From this website, under “Purpose”: “We work to protect children from harmful, unscientific ideologies that may lead them to believe either their personality or their body is in need of changing... We recognise that sex is binary, female and male, and that (for the vast majority of people) sex is determined at conception, observed at birth (or in utero), and recorded.” Indeed, lesbians in particular are finding the rainbow movement actively opposes any female-only definition of lesbian. Investigative reporter Julie Szego has written the below linked carefully documented piece on the failed attempt of the Lesbian Action Group to hold a Lesbians Born Female event at the publicly funded Victorian Pride Centre in October 2023. The Lesbian Action Group applied to the Australian Human Rights Commission for a temporary exemption from anti-discrimination legislation so that they could hold an event for exclusively same-sex attracted biological women. Opposing their application was LGBTQI+ advocacy group Equality Australia, who successfully fought against the Lesbian Born Female application, which the Commission denied. See Julie Szego, *Szego Unplugged*, 2 September 2023, “LGBTQ is really QTGBL”, <https://szegounplugged.substack.com/p/lgbtq-is-really-qtgbgl>.

10 The Australian Federal Sex Discrimination Act (1984) was amended in 2013 to remove from the Act the following legal definitions: “‘man’ means a member of the male sex irrespective of age,” and “‘woman’ means a member of the female sex irrespective of age.”

11 Butler uses these catchall designations “the Left” and “the Right” repeatedly throughout her book in a manner inimical to any political science I have read.

who fear gender). *Who's Afraid of Gender?* is thus an unashamed apology for “the Left” against “the Right.” As already mentioned, this book is best understood as a polemic work of political advocacy—with all the partisan and rhetorical techniques of this genre—and not a work of scholarship as such.

Two Types of Gender Fearers: Religious Traditionalists and Gender Critical Feminists

In advancing her political apology, Butler identifies two chief opponents. Firstly, there are religious believers in a natural sex binary and in heteronormative Christian sexual ethics, which she implacably opposes.¹² For her, this politico-religious opposition to “the Left” is largely energised by an unholy alliance between the Vatican and American Evangelical Christians, as well as some Muslims and other reactionary religious groups around the globe. Religious conservatives are seen by Butler as integral with the political far-Right which is now unabash-

For but two examples, see Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 15 (for “the Right”), 24 (for “the Left”).

- 12 According to Butler, gender fear is deeply rooted in traditional biblical and Christian natural law conceptions of human sexuality. Hence, to her, traditional Roman Catholic sexual doctrines are particularly phobic towards gender. Butler explains: Gender-phobic Christians believe that “God made the sexes in a binary way, and it is not the prerogative of humans to remake them outside of those terms... [Here,] sex differences are established in natural law; that is, that the content of that law is established by nature and therefore, presumably, has universal validity. Since nature is understood to be created by God, to defy natural law is to defy God. What follows from this set of beliefs is that if one has a will, or acts wilfully, then one not only defies God and the natural order he created but also threatens to take over his will ... Joseph Ratzinger warned that gender theorists were imperilling the family by challenging the proposition that Christian family roles could be and should be derived from biological sex ... The integrity of the family, understood as both Christian and natural, was said to be imperilled by a spectre looming on the horizon: ‘gender ideology’” (Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 37–38). That is, traditional Catholics who adhere to the natural law sexual ethics of the church are necessarily afraid of gender. It is significant that Butler completely ignores careful Roman Catholic critiques of her gender theory, such as put forward in Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022).

edly fascist, as seen in Bolsonaro, Putin, Meloni, Abascal, Orbán, and Trump.¹³

Secondly, there are misguided scholars who call themselves gender critical feminists, though Butler prefers to call them “trans-exclusionary feminists”¹⁴ (a shortening of the derogatory term TERF, i.e., “trans-exclusionary radical feminists”). Butler holds that such misguided “feminists” are unwittingly acting in alliance with religious conservatives of the far-Right. She does not find gender critical feminists to be critical, feminist, Left, or radical.¹⁵ Further, even though the prominent gender critical feminist Kathleen Stock is a lesbian, an atheist, and of liberal Left political and moral commitments, Stock—under Butler’s polemic rubric—fears gender and is thus named a tacit supporter of both homophobic reactionary religion and the fascist Right.¹⁶

Leaving gender critical feminists to make their own response to Butler’s book,¹⁷ let us look more closely at how she understands religion and gender.

13 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 37–72.

14 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 137.

15 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 22: “To be ‘gender critical’ is thus a misnomer deployed by some feminists who make implicit or explicit alliances with the right-wing opposition to gender.” And, at 137: “transphobic feminism is not feminism.” See also chapter 5, titled “TERFs and British Matters of Sex: How Critical Is Gender-Critical Feminism?” (134–169).

16 Butler critiques Stock directly at 150–160. More often, Butler attacks gender critical feminists in general and undocumented categories.

17 Kathleen Stock, “What is Judith Butler Afraid of?” *UnHerd*, 14 March 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/583d3pr4>. Regarding Butler’s critique of herself, Stock notes: “Though at times [Butler] feigns charitable curiosity about some of her argumentative targets, the attitude never lasts. A sentence about gender-critical feminists that starts with ‘To be fair’ ends up, a mere clause or two later, talking about their supposed affinities with ‘fascist politics.’ There isn’t a single objection lodged against opponents that does not come freighted with the implication of moral taint and/or stupidity. Of course, painting one’s intellectual enemies as cartoon characters is a known tactic of modern transactivism; still, it is shocking to see it done so crudely by someone who retains a high reputation in many quarters.” Even so, Stock thinks Butler is correctly identifying deep and serious anger at the way gender theories have been socially, legally, therapeutically, and educationally implemented in

Butler on Religion and Gender

In the wake of Butler's four-decade career, there is now a thriving field of study that goes under the banner of queer theology within liberal Christian domains. Butler shows some awareness of this movement but does not draw on it. Using her rubric, queer theology is not "afraid of gender" and should be included by Butler in the progressive Left. But when it comes to the Vatican and any theologically and morally conservative Christian opposition to Butler's third wave gender theory and its contemporary evolution in the queer and trans domains, she has some sharp attacks to make, although she has no interest in engagement. Clearly, theologically and morally conservative Christians are the core constituency containing those who are afraid of gender. Butler wants to convert or anathematise gender critical feminists, but she is simply opposed to conservative religion.

Further, she expects nothing but irrational and defeatist rage from any Christian adhering to theologically and morally conservative sexual ethics. She notes: "Those who should be most enraged by my argument are those who believe that the gender binary is mandated by a version of natural law referenced or occasioned by the Bible ... They have a great deal to lose, and they should start [the] process of mourning. Let's hope their destructive rage turns to productive grief."¹⁸

I am a Christian philosopher, situated within theologically conservative and liturgically high Anglicanism. I believe in a natural law conception of the meaning of human sexuality, as referenced by the Bible. Three things become immediately apparent when I read Butler's above cited quote.

Firstly, one wonders how inclusive and diverse Butler's conception of a non-gender-phobic global future really is. Using round figures,

the past decade. Stock notes: "It is obvious that many across the world have become angered by the grandiose, narcissistic overreach of academics [like Butler]: thinkers indifferent to the real-world havoc wrought by their barmy ideas and impenetrable speech codes, and who pillory all objectors as badly intentioned or deeply confused, no matter what the background reasoning."

18 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 237.

Butler obviously believes that 1.4 billion Roman Catholics, most of about 650 million Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians, the strong majority of 220 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, an unspecifiable but large number of evangelical and theologically conservative Protestants, most of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims, and most orthodox Jews—in aggregate, somewhere around 50% of the globe's population—are simply wrong about sex and gender, and need to abandon their indefensible fealty to their holy books and religious authorities, and until then, they are dangerous genderphobes with whom there can be no reasonable discourse.¹⁹

In a Butler versus divine revelation contest on sex and gender, Butler has no doubt that she has won hitherto and will ultimately win. However, in social scientific terms, particularly on a global scale, this seems highly unlikely. If Butler is hoping that the secularisation thesis will come to her aid and rid the world of religion, this is simply not supported by the evidence.²⁰

Secondly, whatever my emotional response to Butler's arguments may be—rage or otherwise—perhaps I can be reasoned with.

19 Buddhism and Hinduism are outside of my field of scholarly expertise, so I am only commenting on the three Abrahamic world religions here, all of whom traditionally reference their understanding of the nature and meaning of human sexuality, and sexual and familial ethics, to the Hebrew Bible. I do not mean to imply here that there is a 50/50 global divide between those who embrace Butler's queer gender theory, and those who have traditional heteronormative views about human sex and gender. Clearly, contemporary queer gender theory is very much a recent and Western development, and within the West it is a nonconformist and small minority movement. It is a strange feature of Butler's polemic stance that she wants to claim persecuted minority status for non-heteronormative people, at the same time as expecting that all sensible and nonphobic people will be entirely on board with the queer Diversity Equality and Inclusion movement the world over, and indeed that it is largely traditional Western Christians who have imposed a false heteronormative filter on how non-Western people understand sex and gender.

20 See Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Berger notes: "the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions ..., is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken" (2).

Certainly from my side, I have *reasons* to find Butler's account of sex and gender unpersuasive.

Thirdly, on many political issues—in the evangelical tradition of William Wilberforce, Hannah Moore, and Lord Shaftsbury, and in continuation with nineteenth-century Presbyterian environmentalism, Methodist unionists, Catholic Rerum Novarum Labor Party supporters, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, etc.—many deeply religious Christians have, and always will oppose fascism, racism, environmental degradation, neoliberalism, antisemitism, islamophobia, asylum-seeker rejection, and so forth. To imply that such Christians are fascists if they adhere to traditional Christian sexual ethics is simply false. Was Bonhoeffer a fascist because he adhered to a traditional Christian sexual ethic?

I am unpersuaded by Butler's characterisation of a sharply binary Left versus Right war between those who allegedly fear and those who do not fear what she inconclusively means by "gender." On what grounds does she imply that all theologically conservative Christians who do not accept her gender ideology are either overtly or tacitly fascist? Must all gender critical feminists be overt or tacit Trump supporters? Leaving aside psychosocial speculative theories, Butler provides no *evidence* which shows that being a conservative Christian or a gender critical feminist inevitably places one's political loyalties firmly within "the Right."

Empirically, Butler's assertion of a necessary binary Left/Right polarisation on the basis of one's stance on contemporary gender theory/ies is demonstrably untrue, taking gender critical feminists such as Kathleen Stock, and Christians of the Left who do not embrace Butler's gender theory, such as myself, as examples. But Butler claims that the fact that people such as Stock and myself (for different reasons) do not agree with the validity of her account of gender and sex, means that we *fear* gender and are hence irrational and dangerous fascists. Unconsciously, I really must be of the far-Right, however I vote, whatever causes I donate to, whatever I might do and profess. This is a standard rainbow activist line, where even a progressive atheist Jew

can be denounced for holding a “far-Right Nazi ideology”²¹ because she has concerns about the mandatory affirmation of hormonal and surgical sex-presentation interventions for minors. In like manner, Butler believes she knows my evil Christian motivations better than I do myself because she understands how gender has become a “psycho-social fantasy,”²² particularly for people like me who have a sacramental natural law understanding of the nature and meaning of human sexuality.

Butler's assertions that global traditional religion is a necessary force for fascism and bigotry, that committed theological conservatives cannot be reasoned with, and that all theological conservatives are definitionally of the regressive and irrationally phobic Right, strikes me as lacking in any sort of serious credibility. But leaving this to one side, I would now like to critically explore what Butler means by “gender” and “sex” in relation to science and Christian faith. This is no easy task because in this text Butler often assumes rather than defends her main theoretical commitments. We must, then, do some exploration of Butler's first-order presuppositions before proceeding further.

Epistemology and Sophistry

Some time back Professor Martha Nussbaum argued that Butler is not a philosopher at all, but she is a sophist.²³ This need not be taken as an

21 This is a direct quote by Natalie Feliks—a trans activist—on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Media Watch* (26 June 2023) hurled against Julie Szego, who is a politically Left Jew, and a legally trained investigative journalist, who thinks we should be cautious and slow rather than rapidly “affirming” gender dysphoric children towards irreversible sex-presentation transition, <https://tinyurl.com/nfhsan34>.

22 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 24.

23 Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,” *The New Republic*, 23 February 1999, <https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody>. As someone who has carefully worked through Butler's earlier theoretical works, Nussbaum notes: “It is difficult to come to grips with Butler's ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are. Butler is a very smart person. In public discussions, she proves that she can speak clearly and has a quick grasp of what is said to her. Her written style,

insult as pre- and post-Socratic sophists have been much admired in Western academic circles for most of the modern and all of the post-modern intellectual periods. The decisive difference between a philosopher and a sophist—according to Nussbaum and Pieper²⁴—is that

however, is ponderous and obscure. It is dense with allusions to other theorists, drawn from a wide range of different theoretical traditions. In addition to Foucault, and to a more recent focus on Freud, Butler's work relies heavily on the thought of Louis Althusser, the French lesbian theorist Monique Wittig, the American anthropologist Gayle Rubin, Jacques Lacan, J. L. Austin, and the American philosopher of language Saul Kripke. These figures do not all agree with one another, to say the least; so an initial problem in reading Butler is that one is bewildered to find her arguments buttressed by appeal to so many contradictory concepts and doctrines, usually without any account of how the apparent contradictions will be resolved." This shifting linguistic web of hard to tie-down assertions is no accident in Butler. As regards sophism, Nussbaum notes: "Butler gains prestige in the literary world by being a philosopher; many admirers associate her manner of writing with philosophical profundity. But one should ask whether it belongs to the philosophical tradition at all, rather than to the closely related but adversarial traditions of sophistry and rhetoric. Ever since Socrates distinguished philosophy from what the sophists and the rhetoricians were doing, it has been a discourse of equals who trade arguments and counter-arguments without any obscurantist sleight-of-hand. In that way, he claimed, philosophy showed respect for the soul, while the others' manipulative methods showed only disrespect."

- 24 Josef Pieper, *What Does "Academic" Mean?* (South Bend: Saint Augustine Press, 2015). Pieper explains that the defining feature of philosophy in the Western academic tradition is a commitment to theoretical truth. In his words, "philosophical' amounts to 'theoretical' ... What, namely, is the original meaning of 'theoretical'? What is meant is an attitude towards the world which is only concerned with the fact that things reveal themselves as they are—which is what truth actually consists of. To be aiming at truth and nothing else is the essence of *theoria*" (8). In contrast, the sophist aims at power. And, then, he adds: "The sophist is a timeless figure, and the battle fought by Socrates-Plato against Protagoras and Gorgias is never-ending ... What all [the many varieties of] sophistry have in common is exactly that which separates them from the striving after knowledge which has its greatest witness in Socrates and Plato. It is the striving, identical down through the centuries, to discover the foundation of reality and existence ... [This can only be achieved] in an attitude of silent *theoria*—concerning himself with truth and nothing else, like a listener receiving his way of measuring things from the reality of the world which has been there before him—this is something the sophist will never accept. He [the sophist] will reject even more the idea that there could be such a thing as 'sacred tradition,' based on a message about the world and existence as a whole, from a higher than human source which also sustains that message. He [the sophist] chooses freedom—however empty it is—and achieves it by forgetting long established tradition. Commitment to 'tradition' seems to the critical

the philosopher aims at truth and believes it can, in some measure, be known. In contrast, the sophist does not believe truth can be known, and thus knowledge is reduced from being genuinely truth-concerned and becomes intrinsically interested, useful, and poetically constructed. To the sophist, knowledge is power and poetry (i.e., of human making) only. Essential truth is anathema to sophistry.

The unknowability and indefinability (philosophically speaking, the non-essentialism) of “gender” is firmly upheld by Butler on the opening page of her book. She explains: “The myriad, continuing debates about the word shows that no one approach to defining, or understanding gender reigns.”²⁵ Clearly, those who are not afraid of gender accept that there is no definable truth about what gender is, hence gender pluralism and unlimited gender identity complexity must be upheld, whereas those who are afraid of gender falsely (according to Butler) think they know what gender essentially is.

Here, the non-essentialist and plural constructions of gender that Butler celebrates, replace phantasmal and phobic essentialist beliefs. As a result, traditional Christians find the “truth” of gender non-essentialism profoundly threatening as regards their own sense of sex and gender identity. The horror traditional Christians experience on exposure to Butler’s non-essentialist understanding of gender is a function of the unmasking of the Christian delusion of sexual essentialism, and the delusion of sex-tied gender essence. Hence, Christian traditionalists are irrationally enraged by Butler’s work. There are a range of things that can be said here.

Firstly, it seems likely to me that gender really is an entirely non-essential and poetically constructed word/idea/ideology and what conservative Christians do not like is that a non-essential linguistic and performative construction is being used to displace an entirely different category of meaning, which is the essential meaning of the natural kinds of male and female sex in humans. If this is the case then Chris-

autonomous subject to be unjustified and, above all, unbearable” (27–28).

25 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 3.

tians are not “afraid of gender,” but they are dismayed that what they understand to be an essential reality (male and female sex) is being laid aside in favour of a non-real constructed idea (gender identity) that promotes queer sexual ethics in direct opposition to traditional Christian sexual ethics. Of course, Butler has sophisticated arguments as to why gender *and* sex are always co-constructed, and why sex also cannot be an essential natural category, which we shall examine below.

Leaving whether sex is definable or not to one side, the point I am making here is that Butler imposes the category of gender-phobia on conservative Christians when that is not at all how Christians understand themselves.²⁶ Butler is playing a political naming game with traditional religious people (who take God to have created human sex, as male and female) where Butler is seeking to impose normative meanings on others that they do not accept for themselves. Clearly, rainbow “inclusion” is just as exclusionary towards people of heteronormative sexual ethics as it complains heteronormative sexual ethics is exclusionary of heteronormative deviance.

As an aside, it seems strangely naïve of Butler to be so confident that a global revolution in gender normativities overthrowing traditional religiously framed sex and gender familial structures will necessarily occur. Upwards of half the globe’s population adhere to religiously framed heteronormative sexual ethics within the Abrahamic frameworks. Further, the idea that heteronormativity is only native to Abrahamic religious frameworks is obviously false as the vast majority of all humans are brought up in reasonably stable heteronormative families (with a female mother and a male father), and do not live in sex and gender pluralist enclaves like West Hollywood (where highly visible and proudly non-heteronormative people are *still* a minority). Butler seems to be unrealistically expecting that most people will simply drop the normative frameworks they have been deeply formed by, and joyfully or grudgingly adapt to rainbow sexual normativities.

26 Butler recognises this dynamic on page 112, but deflects it by arguing that it is impossible to know what “sex” means outside of the ever-fluid and variable cultural, subjective, and self-defined categories of gender.

Butler's confidence that a global gender normativity revolution is inevitable reminds me of Marx's historical materialist confidence in the inevitable victory of religion-discarding class war, resulting in atheist global communism in short order after the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848. Upheaving long established traditions that are integral with such basic human realities as sacred sexually reproductive heteronormative familial beliefs and practices is perhaps something only progressive academics in their arcane discourse echo-chambers can imagine as an obvious and necessary development in global human affairs.

Secondly, there are, as already indicated, two broad trajectories within Western intellectual traditions—philosophy and sophistry—and Butler is presupposing that only sophistry is valid.

The relationship between contingency and flux on the one hand and essential meaning on the other hand, admits of two basic approaches in the Western intellectual tradition. Classical philosophy is deeply aware of epistemic complexity,²⁷ and yet finds transcendent Goodness, Beauty, Truth, Reason, and Unity to have divine warrants such that human knowledge partially admits of a true knowledge of the nature and meaning of reality. In contrast, sophistry says that all categories of essential meaning are illusions and the “truth” is that there is no Truth.²⁸ Here, all meaning is contingently co-constructed out of

27 See Lloyd P. Gerson, *Ancient Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

28 Truth is an essentialist category. The very idea of truth as regards morals and religion presupposes that there are essential qualitative intellectual realities independent of human subjectivity and cultural construction that can be partially known. The very idea of truth as regards scientific and historical facts presupposes that there are real quantitative material realities, independent of human subjectivity and cultural construction, which present essential intellectual features to our minds via our senses, that can also be methodically verified beyond reasonable doubt. Human knowledge that is truth-seeking is thus more or less *true*, depending on how well the essential realities of quality and quantity are grasped in the human epistemic process. Truth is *found* rather than made, even though the process of partially finding truth requires the use of culturally and historically situated words and ideas, that are indispensable to the truth-seeking process.

the raw (in itself, meaningless) givenness of material existence and the poetic human meaning categories of cultural norms and political power. Hence in the first wave of classical sophistry Protagoras claimed that the human being is the measure of all things (all “truths” are measured by humanly constructed meaning); Thrasymachus claimed that justice is whatever is in the interest of the strong (power is just power, justice is an illusion);²⁹ Gorgias held that with the right linguistic manoeuvres you could make any argument win or lose (words are not carriers of truth but wonderfully pliable tools of interest), and Democritus’ materialism held that there is no intellective essence in natural reality (or anywhere), but only atom, motion, and void exist (essential intellective truth is an illusion). A more developed scepticism is integral with the hedonic and materialist forms of sophistry in late antiquity,³⁰ and it is the early modern revival of antique sceptical materialist, naturalist, and hedonic thinkers—Sextus Empiricus, Lucretius, Epicurus—that influenced modern science in a sophistic direction right from the seventeenth century.

With the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Hume established a sceptical stance as regards faith-free sensory knowledge, such that sense perception did not give one Truth, but only solipsistic *a posteriori* impressions of an unverifiable external “reality.” Equally, the rationalists of the Enlightenment sought to make reason self-justifying without divine or faith-based warrants, and they discovered that theologically purified reason had no metaphysical leverage on observable material reality, as human reason—viewed only as of human origin—is entirely circular and linguistically enclosed. In Kant, faith-free Enlightened rationalism and empiricism were synthesised in a

29 This is Plato’s characterisation of the sophistic view that justice is an entirely socially and politically constructed gloss on mere wealth and violent power, as found in *The Republic* 1.

30 I am here using “sophistry” in contrast with “philosophy,” where philosophy refers to the academic mainstream of the middle- and neo-Platonist search for high truth in Greco-Roman antiquity, and where sophistry abandons that search and seeks rather practical usefulness and resigned accommodation to the absurdities and vicissitudes of life.

manner that was entirely epistemically sceptical about metaphysical truth, by means of a shift in focus from reality itself (*noumena*) to reality as it *appears* to human knowledge (*phenomena*). From here modern Western “philosophy” became increasingly sophistic until the categories of scientific positivism were entirely dismissed by the postmodern critique of the metanarrative of scientific truth in the work of Jean-François Lyotard.³¹

Butler's rejection of both gender and sex as having any knowable essential meaning is a function of her sophistic rejection of essential meaning itself, and this is firmly continuous with sophistic trends in modern “philosophy” from the Enlightenment to the present. But there is another tradition that Butler simply dismisses. She notes that “sex can be both real and mutable, unless we believe that ‘the truth’ is always immutable and never historical.”³² But this dismissal is unjustified polemical rhetoric: serious philosophical essentialism does not deny the historical situatedness of the human condition, it rather denies that the human condition is *only* defined by contingent historical flux.³³

Theologically framed essential Realism maintains that whilst Truth cannot be epistemically proven in terms of reductive human sense-perception and logic alone (the two sacred *sola* of the secularising Enlightenment), those who do not presuppose the reality of objective Meaning (the divine *Logos*)³⁴ can simply not be reasoned with.

31 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1984.

32 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 153.

33 That is, the natural kinds of male and female sex are both immutable essential realities *and* historically located facts to a Realist stance. This is neatly the opposite of Butler where the mutable non-essentialism of “sex” is given contingent and ever-changeable “real” historical meanings.

34 It is clear that both Plato and Aristotle uphold the divine and revelatory nature of cosmic Truth, and that this commitment is the grounds of the Western academic tradition in its middle- and neo-Platonist trajectories, as taken up by the Byzantine Christian university initiated by empress Eudocia in the fifth century AD, and as the founding principle of the Western universities, the origins of the contemporary university, in the high Middle Ages. On Plato's philosophical religion, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell,

³⁵ This tradition as taken up by Western Christian philosophers is a good faith enterprise in the reasonably adequate but never totalising truth-seeking powers of valid human reasoning (logic) and sense-derived natural philosophy (science). But this tradition is premised on the conviction that the world is an ordered unity (a cosmos) produced by the divine *Logos* and upheld in its essential ontological categories by the divine Mind. Temporal existence is thus embedded in divinely gifted eternal essence in the Christian Realist intellectual tradition. Admittedly, there are dis-embedding influences against such Realism acting on natural philosophy from well before the modern era (notably Franciscan nominalist and voluntarist traditions from the fourteenth century, and the *natura pura* tradition of sixteenth century). However, it is still the broad assumptions of the older Realist tradition out of which early modern science arises. In this Realist tradition natural quantitative materiality is saturated in qualitative and intellective spiritual meaning and purpose. Here, the flux and contingency of temporal existence yet admits of genuine intelligibility because God gifts essen-

1985), 305–338. Aristotle understands the quest for a knowledge of being itself as the “science that deals with divine objects” (*Metaphysics* 1.2) and uses the term “first philosophy” (what we now call metaphysics) and “theology” (reasoning about the divine) interchangeably (*Metaphysics* 6.1).

35 “Reasoning” that is just about winning arguments, that uses words as tools of power, is sophistry, it is not the philosophical search for truth. This is very powerfully set forth in Book One of Plato’s *Republic* where Thrasymachus argues that justice is defined only by the interests of the powerful. When Socrates argumentatively manoeuvres Thrasymachus into undermining his own argument, Thrasymachus does not admit he is in the wrong, he treats Socrates as if he is only using words as tools of power over Thrasymachus, and simply stops arguing. If your words don’t work to win, and you only “reason” to win, then your “reason” to dialogue evaporates if either the truth is not on your side or if truth cannot be made to appear to be on your side. Josef Pieper looks at this phenomenon closely in his short book *Abuse of Language—Abuse of Power* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992). One cannot have a meaningful truth-seeking dialogue with someone like Judith Butler without accepting her ground rule, that there can be no essential and knowable truth. She is not looking for truth as she does not believe it exists or could ever be found. She is looking to construct frames of meaning and governmental norms that allow her to be and do whatever she wants to be or do, and she thinks all her interlocutors are doing that as well. Sophistry is not philosophy. Sophistry is at times sparkling and brilliantly sophisticated, but it has no interest in truth-seeking dialogue.

tial natural kinds to the cosmos and upholds the entire created order with the Divine Word.

As Funkenstein notes, the early modern period gave rise to “a secular theology ... [where] science, theology, and philosophy [were] seen as almost one and the same occupation.”³⁶ Good faith in partially apprehended transcendent essence is here—in the academic tradition established by Plato—the grounds of truth-seeking reason. Yet Funkenstein also notes that this period is decisively closed by Kant’s move in secularising knowledge.³⁷ Intriguingly, historians working on the deep impact of the Bible and Christian theology on early modern science make it reasonable to assume that there was no such thing as naïve secular empiricism (ironically) until *after* Hume.³⁸ Culturally assumed theological commitments made early modern positivism possible, but that early modern positivism was theologically grounded, unlike post-Enlightenment and secularised positivism. That is, positivism not grounded in good faith that our senses in some manner reveal true created essences in the world becomes philosophically unsustainable after the secularisation of knowledge with the Enlightenment.

What I am getting at is that Butler refuses to even acknowledge the serious intellectual heritage of the Realist philosophical tradition in which traditional Christian understandings of the sacred meaning of human sexuality and the essential natural kinds of male and female humans (as divine image bearers, hence icons, hence not to be sexually defaced or sexually violated) is located. By her view, all philosophy is sophistry. But that becomes problematic for her as well.

If one is a non-essentialist as Butler is, on what grounds can (in her view) the *construction* of essential divine meaning that under-

36 Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3.

37 Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 346–364.

38 See, for example, Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Reijer Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Vancouver: Regent, 2000).

pins a performative belief in the natural sex binary be dismissed as invalid? That is, Butler is privileging only non-essentialist sex and gender constructions (as if non-essence is itself essentially true) over traditional essentialist sex constructions, be they grounded in religion and Realism or not. But post-Enlightenment non-essentialism does not allow for any real distinction in truth between *any* meaning construction. So why should “born woman”—as an exclusively sex-defined gender-identity category—now be inadmissible? Butler unjustifiably and incoherently simply *presupposes* that essentialist sex constructions are false and non-essentialist sex constructions are true.

But here is her problem. Only an essentialist approach to truth is consistently able to claim that some sex-related behaviour normativities align with moral truth, and other sex-related behaviour normativities do not align with moral truth. If you accept the divine revelation status of the Bible and you combine that with a broadly Aristotelian natural law outlook as regards human reproduction and family life, then you have a coherent normativity basis which is always expressed in some degree of culturally specific manners, but which is authoritative for Christians regarding what is sexually moral and what is sexually immoral. No such basis can be asserted by the anarchic pluralism of gender and sex non-essentialism.

Butler’s anti-essentialism has no conception of *real* moral truth which can justify her supposedly moral opposition to Christian heteronormative sexual ethics. But Butler *does* exclude Christian heteronormative sexual ethics because it is incompatible with the normativity structures of dogmatically non-essentialist queer sexual ethics. This, as already hinted at, is an unavoidable feature of any normativity structure; any non-normative outlook will be excluded from any given normative framework. Rainbow morality *cannot* be inclusive of Christian sexual ethics if it is to be legally used as normative for all people under any specific legal jurisdiction.

This point needs to be underscored. Queer sexual ethics is incompatible with any divinely revealed and natural law conception of a real natural sex binary. Hence, traditional Christian sexual ethics must be

excluded from the rainbow reformation.³⁹ The way the rainbow fudges its intolerance of traditional Christian sexual ethics is by means of the naming game of cis gender. Butler implies that if you want to live in a heteronormative family, you can still do that, provided you play a naming game with yourself where you drop the idea that heterosexual marriage or celibacy is or should be (even just for Christians) divinely designated as sexually normative. Further, you must no longer define masculinity—however broad the category—as a cultural function of being of the male sex, or femininity—however broad the category—as a cultural function of being of the female sex. Being cis gendered is hence included in rainbow gender pluralism and sex fluidity.

Such gender-sex constructions (cis gendered people) now accept that there are no categories of deviance from heterosexual norms that are either unnatural or contrary to divinely revealed sexual ethics. That is, accepting the designation of cis gender is incompatible with

39 Human sexuality, heteronormativity, and “gender identity” (whatever that might mean) are not ultimate concerns for Christian theology. There will be no marriage in the resurrection and the sacramental meaning of human sexuality is defined by the love of the Groom (Christ) for the Bride (the Church), such that human sexuality will be transformed and taken up into a higher and (non-biologically reproductive) spiritual plane. So far this sounds a bit similar to some aspects of queer gender theory. But it is in fact opposite. Whilst sex and gender identity indeed are not ultimate and eternal for the Christian, for this life they really matter, and matter as gifts of God. Saint Paul explains that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and for this reason we must not sin sexually (1 Corinthians 6:12–20). Jesus notes that God made us male and female and it is for this reason that the sacred unity of monogamous lifelong, sexually exclusive, heterosexual marriage—where the man and the woman are joined through sexual union by God—is to be respected by all (Matthew 19:3–6). As God’s creatures, we do not determine who we are, but are gifted to the world as—for the very large majority—unambiguously a male or a female. But transgenderism posits modern technology as the means of creating our bodies to be what “sex” we determine (though sex cannot be surgically or hormonally changed from male to female or from female to male), and to give ourselves any gender identity we determine or somehow innately know (whatever body God gave us). And queer theory explicitly celebrates sexual acts and relationships that are incompatible with traditional Christian marriage, and explicitly affirms what Christian heteronormativity defines as deviant from the God-ordained norm. The rainbow reformation is incompatible with traditional Christian sacred meanings, Christian social normativities, and Christian ethical frameworks as regards human sexuality.

traditional Christian sexual ethics. A traditional Christian cannot accept the naming game of being cis gendered and still be faithful to Christian sexual ethics and the Christian belief that—to quote Jesus of Nazareth—“from the beginning God made them male and female”⁴⁰... for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife” (Matthew 19:5). The natural and iconological kinds of male and female sex, and the sacred covenantal relationship of heterosexual marriage are integral features of Christian sexuality.

This is not compatible with queer inclusion, and queer inclusion is now determined to exclude Christian sexual ethics and any Christian understanding of the meaning of heterosexual marriage from the domains of legal, educational, institutional, and socially normative life. No wonder Butler expects traditional Christians to respond to her assertions with rage.⁴¹

Radical liberalism without any mandated norms, where people do as they please, in theory allows Christians to have Christian heteronormative sexual ethics in their own communities and does not require them to adhere to queer sexual ethics performative and virtue signalling norms. But that is not what rainbow *normativity* imposes.

Rainbow normativity means that even if I am a Christian I am required to use gender categories for people that are incompatible with my own natural law conception of the reality of a person's gender being tied to their sex.

I am required to let transwomen into women's only spaces even if I think this is a sexual deviance, an affront to the modesty codes of my faith, and a danger to the sexual safety of vulnerable women and girls. Normativity structures are *always* exclusionary, be they Christian or rainbow.

In sum, Butler presupposes the unassailable validity of sophistry

40 Jesus is quoting Genesis 1:27 (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them”). Binary human sexuality is an express aspect of the sacred iconography of the human body in Hebraic and Christian sexual ethics.

41 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 237.

and the obvious impossibility of philosophy. She has a non-essentialist commitment to radical epistemic undefinability which is the basis for her preferring “complexity” over clear—if never total—definitions, which also entails that entirely poetic (simply made up) human meanings are always inescapably entailed (“co-constructed”) in any so-called positive knowledge of any natural “reality” (such as “sex”). She does not argue *for* this position, she argues *from* this position, maintaining the rhetorical and polemic anti-essentialist stance that the point of language and reasoning is to get other people to play your naming game, rather than the common search for truth. Anyone who refuses to accept the meanings of her normative and “factual” naming game is simply attacked as immoral and stupid,⁴² but never seriously engaged with in the process of truth-seeking. This is because Butler does not believe there is any essential truth to be known about anything. Rather, language is—in the final analysis—nothing but a medium of governance, of power, and of normative assertion.

In contrast to Butler's sophistic anti-essentialist conception of gender, Christian sexual ethics and sacramental understandings of the meaning of the sexed human body have theological kinship with the Platonist and Aristotelian philosophical trajectory in the West.

There is indeed an epistemic and ontological incommensurability between Christian sexual ethics and queer gender normativities. Butler is riding this incommensurability politically, using “the Left” and “the Right” as catchall ideological tools to paint all opponents of queer gender normativity as irrationally phobic and morally despicable. This is consistent with sophistic conceptions of power, but it has no interest in truth (as truth is an essentialist category) and it is determined to exclude Christian and all traditional sex essentialism from its Left utopia of humanity and kindness. Bearing this in mind, it will now be relatively straightforward to engage with the main points put forward by Butler in her book.

42 See Kathleen Stock's comments in footnote 17.

Butler's Conception of Gender (Culture/Subjectivity) and Sex (Nature) Co-Construction

As already mentioned, Butler holds that the only final truth about gender is that there is no essential truth about what it is. Anyone who disagrees with this is an immoral and ignorant sufferer from the psychosocial condition of gender phobia. Gender identity is thus radically subjective in the sense that we must allow people to self-define their gender identities, but it is also integral with the malleability of the human body (which we must be able to alter to conform to our gender-identity should we wish) and with normative social governance structures (which we must shape to align with queer sexual ethics and identity politics). Trawling through her book for some clear descriptions of this stance, I have found the following: "Whatever else gender means, it surely names for some a felt sense of the body, in its surfaces and depths, a lived sense of being a body in the world *in this way*."⁴³ This is about as specific as Butler gets regarding any definition of gender. This is because her radically contingent⁴⁴ non-essentialism *requires* gender to be undefinable, but also (ironically) gender must non-essentially *define* the meaning and facts of the sexed body. Embracing gender-and-sex non-essentialism is the same thing to Butler as not fearing gender. Consider the following quotes:

Nature is not the ground upon which construction of gender happens. Both material and social dimensions of the body are constructed through an array of practices, discourse, and technologies. This process of co-construction brings attention to how materiality of the body is formed.⁴⁵

If sex is framed within cultural norms, then it is already gender.⁴⁶

43 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 29.

44 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 234: "every way of referring to gender has a certain contingency." Emphasis added.

45 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 33.

46 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 119.

Gender is made through certain structures of power, which means ... that gender is constructed.⁴⁷

[Citing Katherine McKinnon] “Sexuality, then, is a form of power. Gender, as socially constructed, embodies it, not the reverse.”⁴⁸

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature: co-construction is a better way to understand the dynamic relation between the social and the biological in matters of sex.⁴⁹

Sex and gender constitute one another.⁵⁰

The social *produces* the biological.⁵¹

In other words, Butler maintains that as cultural meanings and political governance structures change, so too do gender *and* sex. This presents a considerable problem to the very idea of validly verified scientific classification. However complicated this matter really is, the Aristotelian notion of objective natural kinds remains basic to modern scientific classification.⁵² To quote the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “Scientific disciplines frequently divide the particulars they study into *kinds* and theorize about those kinds. To say that a kind is *natural* is

47 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 139.

48 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 140.

49 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 188.

50 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 207.

51 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 216. Emphasis in original.

52 For a very helpful book on how demanding this domain really is, see Stewart Umphrey, *The Aristotelian Tradition of Natural Kinds and Its Demise* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2018). For a very accessible, yet richly researched text on the ongoing indebtedness of modern science to ancient and medieval Aristotelianism, see Richard Rubinstein, *Aristotle's Children* (New York: Harvest, 2003). Of course, modern science from Bacon on illustrates a powerful revolt against the Aristotelian hylomorphism and his formal and final causation. However, the great Greek sages never really go away. See David Roochnik, *Retrieving Aristotle in an Age of Crisis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013).

to say that it corresponds to a grouping that reflects the structure of the natural world rather than the interests and actions of human beings.”⁵³ Butler is, of course, proudly opposed to Aristotle, and to natural kinds, but despite her claim that she does not deny “the facts of ‘sex’”⁵⁴ (note that “sex” is expressed by Butler in quotation marks), if she maintains that scientific facts are intrinsically co-constructed by nature and “the interests and actions of human beings,” then she *in fact* denies the normal meaning of scientific classification.

On what a humanly rich and complex enterprise science actually is, scholars such as Polanyi, Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Latour⁵⁵ have provided those of us who think about the meaning of scientific knowledge with much needed corrections to the sort of simplistic scientific positivism assumed by the likes of Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer. Whilst this correction can indeed be read in a postmodern sophisticated direction, it can also be read in a philosophical manner that reopens the traditional Western metaphysical appreciation of natural knowledge where the contingent is a viable partially revealing medium of essential intelligible truths.⁵⁶ I shall not attempt to adjudicate which way science should be read here, but it is simply facile of Butler to assume and assert that traditional Realist accounts of natural knowl-

53 Alexander Bird and Emma Tobin's entry "Natural Kinds," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 28 January 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/Entries/natural-kinds/>.

54 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 170.

55 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Paul Feyerabend, *The Tyranny of Science* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

56 For some examples of metaphysical theologians who embrace both the human poetic side of knowledge and the divine revelation of essence through sense and reason, as partially grasped, see: William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995); John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001); John Betz, *Christ the Logos of Creation* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academics, 2023); Paul Tyson (ed.), *Astonishment and Science: Engagements with William Desmond* (Eugene: Cascade, 2023); Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Paul Tyson, *Returning to Reality* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014); Peter Kreeft, *The Platonic Tradition* (South Bend: Saint Augustine's Press, 2018).

edge are impossible for intelligent and truth-concerned people to pursue today. But let us look more closely at the co-constructivist relation between culture and science that Butler presupposes.

Butler's Relation to the "So-Called Facts" of Science

The way Butler uses scientific facts is slippery. This makes sense if the meaning that "sex" culturally, personally, morally, and politically *needs* to have is determinate of what the relevant scientific facts are (recall "the social *produces* the biological").⁵⁷ Butler claims:

In debates about who can compete in women's sport the matter of sex becomes quite complicated ... In a study funded by the International Olympic Committee in 2014 ... testosterone levels were tested in nearly seven hundred athletes ... The *New York Times* reported that the study found "that 16.5 percent of men had low testosterone levels and 13.7 percent of women had high testosterone levels with considerable overlap between the two groups."⁵⁸

Butler makes this observation in advancing her argument that "sex" (she often puts the word in quotation marks) should really be thought of as "a spectrum or a mosaic, as some scientists have argued, [hence] the so-called facts of sex prove to be more complicated than the simple binary would imply."⁵⁹ The "some scientists" Butler is here referring to⁶⁰ are people like Anne Fausto-Sterling whose innovative work blends Butler's political gender theory with biology.⁶¹ Here I agree with Richard Dawkins, who is an Emeritus Professor at Oxford University, in

57 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 216.

58 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 190.

59 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 190.

60 Butler here cites Daphna Joel, a neurofeminist with undergraduate qualifications in medicine and a doctorate in psychobiology, and Luba Vikhanski, who has a diploma in translation and an MA in journalism. Fausto-Sterling is mentioned throughout this chapter.

61 See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

evolutionary biology. The biological point of sex is reproduction. In humans, people cannot change their reproductive sex. In humans, to get reproduction you need a fertile female to successfully mate with a fertile male. In this functional biological sense, Dawkins is right; sex is a simple binary, for no matter how hard you co-constructively try, no transwoman can be a fertile female, and no transman can be a fertile male.⁶² To biologists such as Dawkins (who is emphatically *not* of the Religious Right), sex is biologically binary and there is a real biological difference between a transwoman and a woman. But back to Butler.

Reading the footnotes and the page following, it seems likely that Butler has read not only the *New York Times* piece cited above, but she has also looked at the study itself.⁶³ Both the *New York Times* article and Butler's citing of that article, leave the reader with the impression that male and female athletes have a "considerable overlap" in their testosterone levels, with the unstated impression that the 16.5% of men and 13.7% of women illustrate this "considerable overlap."

This is a misleading impression. What the study actually says is this:

-
- 62 Richard Dawkins on X: "The way the non-binary faithful obsess about intersexes, and about individuals who can't produce gametes, amounts to a pathetic clutching at straws while they drown in postmodern affluent. Yes, some fish change from sperm-producing male to egg-producing female (or vice versa). That very statement relies on the gametic definition of male & female. Ditto hermaphroditic worms & snails who can produce both male & female gametes. In any case, the existence of intersexes is irrelevant to transexualist claims, since trans people don't claim to be intersexes. Also, as if it matters, humans are not worms, snails, or fish. The rare tetra-amelia syndrome (babies born without limbs) does not negate the statement that *Homo sapiens* is a bipedal species. The rare four-winged bithorax mutation does not negate the statement that *Drosophila* is a Dipteran (two winged) fly. Similarly, the occasional individual who can't produce gametes doesn't negate the generalisation that mammals come in only two sexes, male and female, defined by gamete size. Sex is binary as a matter of biological fact. 'Gender' is a different matter and I leave that to others to define." 1 Feb 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/mr44yeac>.
- 63 That study being: M. L. Healy et al., "Endocrine Profiles in 693 Elite Athletes in the Postcompetition Setting," *Clinical Endocrinology* 81:2 (2014): 294–305, doi:10.1111/cen.12445.

Hormone profiles from elite athletes differ from usual reference ranges.

The influence of sporting activity on endocrine physiology has become of increasing interest in recent years. The reasons include widespread abuse of hormones, particularly anabolic steroids (AS), erythropoietin (EPO), and human growth hormone (GH) as performance-enhancing agents.

The testosterone values show a complete overlap between men and women although the mean values differ. There were 74 of 446 (16.5%) men with a serum testosterone below 8.4 nmol/l, the lower limit of the normal reference range. There were 32 of 234 (13.7%) women with a testosterone level >2.7 nmol/l, the upper limit of the normal reference range.⁶⁴

I am a social scientist. I am trained in the accurate interpretation of social data. This is an important skill, for statistics are often selectively used to advance a claim, and the details of the study are usually very important in understanding what the findings really mean.

Digging into the data for this sample of athletes (and I had to pay to see the data) we find that the mean testosterone level for males is 14.6 nmol/l and the mean testosterone levels for females is 2.7 nmol/l. This shows a totally unmistakable differentiation between average testosterone levels in the men and women of this sample, which is itself within the normal range for men and women. Let us assume that by "overlap" the *New York Times* piece means a range where men and women in the sample illustrate statistically indistinguishable testosterone levels. Drilling down into the data further we find that five men (1.1 % of the 446 men) had testosterone levels of 2 nmol/l and below, whereas 209 women (89.3% of the 234 women) had testosterone levels of 2 nmol/l and below. There is a *very small* statistical overlap between men and women here. Let us call this the female majority set, with the upper normal testosterone level of females setting the boundary. We

64 Healy et al., "Endocrine profiles," 294–295.

then see that 394 men (88.3% of the 446 men) had testosterone levels between 8 nmol/l and an astonishing 41 nmol/l (the normal upper limit is 30 nmol/l, and only five men were over 30 nmol/l in this sample), whereas thirteen elite women athletes (5.5% of the 234 women) had testosterone levels that overlapped with the normal male range, including one female at 32 nmol/l, which is over ten times the normal upper female range. (I'm not the IOC, but that doesn't look natural to me.) Let us call this the male majority set with the lower boundary catching men in the 8 nmol/l range, which is considered the bottom of the normal range. Again, there is a *small* overlap here between men and women.

The only other data set is that set between the normal female range and the normal male range. Here we do see *some* overlap, but it is strongly overrepresented by men by a ratio of two to one. In the between set (between 3 nmol/l and 7 nmol/l) we have 47 men (10.5% of the male sample) and twelve women (5.1% of the female sample). This is a small set between the two very large sets wherein the great majority of athletes sampled still fit into normal testosterone levels for males and females, that do not overlap in any statistically significant manner.

Thinking like a statistician, when the study authors says "testosterone levels show a complete overlap between men and women" all this means is that (barring one woman at zero detected testosterone, a number of gradient gaps up to 14 nmol/l and 14 measurement gradient gaps over 14 nmol/l on the women's chart, and five men at over 32 nmol/l) there were detectable levels of testosterone for both men and women at ranges between 1 nmol/l and 32 nmol/l.

This does not at all mean that there is a "considerable" sex-indeterminate fuzzy zone where male and female athletes cannot really be statistically distinguished on the basis of their testosterone levels. Apart from hormonal substance abuse, elite athletes are abnormal anyway, and certain types of sport impact testosterone levels in sex-specific ways. The relatively high level of male elite athletes with

below normal male testosterone levels, for example, is often observed in male elite extreme endurance athletes.⁶⁵

The point I am making is that Bulter—in a classically sophistic manner—is using “knowledge” as a means of advancing her interest claim when it comes to trans-athletes and her advocacy for the validity of believing in a “complicated” and fluid sex-spectrum. Perhaps she wasn’t deliberately misinterpreting the study, but the *fact* is she has at least implied a misinterpretation that aligns with her prior stance about sex-indeterminacy. The *New York Times* article Butler quotes—something of an apologetic piece for controversial trans-athlete Lia Thomas—also implies this misinterpretation. This happens a lot in this domain.

Trying to find good data sets on people who have had opposite sex hormones, puberty blockers, and sex-presentation altering surgery and have then detransitioned is very hard. As the Cass Report showed, getting accurate data on whether the known physical harms caused by puberty blockers for children (for example) is in other regards beneficial in treating gender dysphoria, is very hard, because if there are no clear benefits (which, according to the Cass Review, the currently available studies show),⁶⁶ this is considered adverse to the rainbow reform agenda, and hence fuel for bigoted fascists, so it is in the public interest not to provide such data.

65 A. C. Hackney and Eser Aggon, “Chronic Low Testosterone Levels in Endurance Trained Men: The Exercise- Hypogonadal Male Condition,” *Journal of Biochemistry and Physiology* 1:1 (2018): 103, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5988228/>.

66 Hilary Cass, “The Cass Review: Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people,” April 2024, <https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report/>. On page 20, the report notes that “the Review stepped into an arena where there were strong and widely divergent opinions unsupported by adequate evidence ... When the review started, the evidence base, particularly in relation to the use of puberty blockers and masculinising/feminising hormones, had already been shown to be weak ... To scrutinise the existing evidence the Review commissioned a robust and independent evidence review and research programme from the University of York ... The University of York’s programme of work has shown that there continues to be a lack of high-quality evidence in this area.”

Bulter's co-constructivist approach where cultural meanings, normative frameworks, and governance structures are what inescapably constructs the natural facts, conveniently enables her to polemically massage scientific data in advancing her cause. This all makes perfect sense if sophistry really is valid, and if "knowledge" is simply a political tool of interested persuasion.

Penultimate Thoughts

Citing Rev Daniel P. Horan (OFM), Butler states:

The Catholic Church needs to give up the "13th century pseudo-science" that informs its views about gender and reexamine what the Congregation for Catholic Education calls its Christian Anthropology, that is, its commitment to regarding the human as composed of an essential and complementary duality, man and woman.⁶⁷

Butler is keen to attack the Christian doctrine that God created the natural kinds of male and female humans by claiming that this doctrine is based on thirteenth-century pseudo-science. Natural philosophy has always been, and always will be ancillary to Christian doctrine. But to deny that there is a Creator, and to deny that we are creatures, is to deny Christian faith—which any atheist is entitled to do—but it is beyond the remit of both secular philosophy and modern science to either conclusively confirm or deny that there is a Creator. Yet, though Christian

67 Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 81–82. Butler here cites a LGBTQTI+ friendly Franciscan friar who is critical of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which strongly supports the Vatican stance upholding the human natural sex binary. What Butler and Horan are not explaining here is that debates about thirteenth century (i.e., Aquinas') natural philosophy are very much live debates in the Catholic Church today, with the old rivals of Franciscan Scotus/Ockham supporters—such as University of Notre Dame's Rev Dr Horan—on one side, and strong Dominican backing supporters of the *Ressourcement* and the Pryzwaran revival of Aquinas, and other John Milbank-inspired advocates of metaphysical theology—such as University of Notre Dame's Professor John Betz—on the other side. This is an ironically fourteenth-century justified polemic comment by Rev Dr Horan.

anthropology grounded in the Bible and sacred doctrine does entail the essential and complementary duality of man and woman, Butler really does expect traditional Christians to “give up” all faith commitments she deems to illustrate genderphobia. And Butler is not alone here. Over the past two decades concerted and well-funded rainbow inclusion movements have been advancing Butler’s stance in faith-based organisations with considerable success.⁶⁸

In my estimation, Butler is a brilliant sophist, and a powerful political propagandist for the queer reform movement. In a secular and progressive country like Australia, this movement has now captured most university campuses, all education departments, and a great deal of sex discrimination and related legislation and policy stances tied to Butler’s concept of gender. Thanks to ACON and other powerful lobby groups and government-sponsored reform bodies, Butler’s notion that sex is a non-essential category which must have legal meanings that negate any natural kind understanding of the male/female sex binary⁶⁹ has been very successful in Australia. The 2013 removal of biological definitions of man and woman from the Australian Sex Discrimination Act (1984) has made all female-only spaces conventional only. The legal and institutional success of Butler’s gender theory has negated the legal propriety of any unwanted public expression of the assumption of biologically essential differences between males and females,

68 For example, the Arcus Foundation is a well-endowed foundation promoting LGBTQI+ causes. The Arcus Foundation donates considerable funds to organisations that “work for LGBTQ Equality with Faith-Based Community and Youth Groups.” Theological conservative faith communities are a distinct focus, as Arcus funds are directed towards promoting LGBTQI+ equality in the Catholic Church (such as via Dignity USA), in American Evangelicals (such as via Reconciling Ministries), and in Islam (such as via The Inner Circle), <https://tinyurl.com/22b2ar8t>. Of course, private foundations are entitled to fund whatever they like, but the point to notice here is that money coming from outside the church, and outside of Christian theology, is being directed into the church with the express aim of changing traditional Christian sexuality theology.

69 People who are born with physiological abnormalities such that they will grow up to be reproductively non-fertile, and/or express some combination of male and some female sex characteristics, are important and precious people—as is every person—but they do not negate the normal reproductive sex binary.

and forbids any normative behaviour premised on that assumption if a complaint is made. Women and girls are no longer entitled to female-only spaces of any sort.⁷⁰ Given the known serious problem of women (females) suffering sexual and other violence from men (males), withdrawing female-only safe spaces is morally inexcusable. The queer reform movement has also legitimated the concerted public denigration of traditional Christian understandings of the sacred and created meaning of human sexuality. Traditional Christian sexual ethics is now deemed to be an expression of phobic and immoral bigotry. Even science has been subsumed into this sophistic manipulative power contest.

Conclusion

After closely reading Judith Butlers book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, I have come to the following four conclusions.

Firstly, Butler's book is driven by the uncompromising binary assertion that one either embraces sex-fluid and pro-queer gender-identity theory, to the exclusion of the scientific facts of the human biological sex binary, or one is a phobic, fascist-supporting, hateful, and unacceptably ignorant person in league with both Donald Trump and the Vatican. This assertion is false if it is intended as a serious intellec-

70 As I write, Sally Grover has today (23 August 2024) been successfully sued in the Federal Court of Australia by XY chromosomed transwoman Roxanne Tickle for unlawful indirect gender-identity discrimination. Grover excluded Tickle from the Giggle for Girls social media platform on the claim that Tickle's sex is male and the app is a female-only app. Dr Anna Cody, The Sex Discrimination Commissioner, under the umbrella of the Australian Human Rights Commission, advocated against Grover as *amicus curiae*, and advised the courts to find in favour of Tickle, as Australian law now recognises no sex-based definition of man or woman, hence there is no place where a male claiming to be a woman can be excluded without that being illegal sexual discrimination. Justice Bromwich did find in favour of Tickle, and determined that an officially altered birth certificate stating that Tickle is female legally demonstrates that sex does indeed change. For Justice Bromwich's summary of his judgement see here: <https://tinyurl.com/42s4b8rv>. See also Law.com for a summary of the case, here: <https://tinyurl.com/5xwsx69y>. See also the LGB Alliance page on the Tickle vs Giggle case, with links to the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's advice to the court, here: <https://tinyurl.com/337sr2tn>.

tual and facts-based argument, but I do not think it is intended in that manner. In keeping with her performative understanding of normative speech acts, I take Butler's book to be an expression of political activism rather than a serious intellectual argument. As a form of political activism that denies that there even could be any genuine facts about what a male and a female human being actually are, I take this to be a dangerous form of political activism that will seriously erode long-established female-only spaces and social norms, to the considerable danger of vulnerable girls and women.

Secondly, Butler's book maintains a clear and uncompromising opposition to traditional Christian sexual heteronormativity. Butler maintains this opposition because she rightly discerns that the categories of sacred sexual meaning embedded in Christian theological anthropology, which are still deeply engrained in Western social norms, are where popular resistance to the rainbow reform agenda is most likely to arise from. But again, Butler offers no serious argument as to why religious stances on the meaning of human sexuality must be wrong, she only offers political rhetoric against religious opposition to her gender theory. There is no truth-seeking reason to take her barrage of insults and attacks on traditional religiously framed understandings of the meaning of human sexuality seriously.

Thirdly, Butler's non-essentialist metaphysics of both sex and gender fails because its dismissal of truth leaves only sophistical persuasion and relativistic virtue signalling as the flimsy grounds on which to accept gender theory. I find no persuasive reasoning in philosophy or science to accept her gender theory.

Fourthly, Butler's slippery use of argument does not simply display itself in the domain of meanings and norms, but in facts and statistics as well. Butler's rhetorical and distorting use of statistics displays her genuine lack of interest in factual truth. Facts are constructed tools of power to Butler, not truths that can be reasonably verified and respected.

In light of these findings, it seems clear that a reasonable case for heteronormativity needs to be reasserted in the public domain by

science-respecting Christians. But, as we can now see, thanks to the courageous example of gender critical feminists and women seeking to assert female-only safety rights, law and the institutional culture of universities and the mass media are now firmly set in favour of the rainbow reformation. To stand up for Christian heteronormativity now will entail a serious and unpleasant struggle. But perhaps that struggle cannot be avoided any longer.

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Received: 27/05/24 Accepted: 20/08/24 Published: 24/09/24